

Much work remains on kids insurance expansion

By MIKE DENNISON - 02/08/2009

Now that President Barack Obama has signed the bill expanding the Children's Health Insurance Program, Montana can roll out its own ambitious, voter-approved expansion and cover another 30,000 uninsured kids, right?

Well, yes — but not so fast. The roll-out of the Healthy Montana Kids program is still months away, health officials said last week, and many decisions must be made on design and approval of the plan.

Also, there are differing opinions on how and when to do it — and lawmakers close to the program say they'd like to have more input.

"I think we should have a lot to say (about how the program will work)," says Rep. Penny Morgan, R-Billings. "We're elected here by the people. Who knows what goes on in our communities better than us?"

Healthy Montana Kids is the program contained in Initiative 155, which Montana voters overwhelmingly approved last November.

I-155 essentially expanded the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Medicaid, which are government-funded health insurance for low- and middle-income families. The aim is to cover about 30,000 of the approximately 37,000 children in Montana without health insurance.

Both programs are funded by the state and federal government. Obama's signing of the CHIP bill means federal money will be available to finance Montana's expansion.

But the state still must design the CHIP and Medicaid expansions and get each one approved by federal health officials, as well as approve its own funding.

Mary Dalton, director of Medicaid Services for Montana, said last week that the state hopes to get approval and kick off the programs Oct. 1.

"Our goal is to be ready for the hundreds of kids that may apply," she said. "The more (kids) the better, and the earlier the better."

To get to that point, however, many decisions lie ahead. Lawmakers must approve state funding of some \$20 million a year; people to register the huge influx of new kids must be funded, hired and trained; a public outreach program must be designed and launched; the number of kids estimated for each program must be determined.

The state Department of Public Health and Human Services has formed a 10-member "work group" of agency people to design the plans and work through these decisions.

It will forward its program plans to agency Director Anna Whiting Sorrell for her approval, and Gov. Brian Schweitzer will have the final say before they're sent on to the feds.

Reps. Mary Caferro, D-Helena, and Rep. Morgan wondered last week why the group wouldn't include consumers, physicians or others who are closer to the people the plan would directly affect.

Caferro has ideas on how the expansion should be designed and promoted, to cover the maximum number of children who need health insurance.

For example, she asked why the promotion campaign shouldn't start sooner, even though kids new to the program won't be able to be insured until Oct. 1. The state could approve people, build a waiting list and then get them on the program on its opening day, she said.

“This is one of the most monumental changes in health care in Montana history,” she said. “Do the outreach now, to let people know there are big changes coming.”

Caferro also said the plan should move more children into Medicaid right away, because it has a better health-benefits package than CHIP, and then start filling up the CHIP slots.

State officials want to push as many people as possible into the CHIP program, because it has a better federal “match,” Dalton said. The feds pay about 78 percent of the CHIP costs and only 68 percent of the Medicaid costs.

Another factor further muddying the water is the economic stimulus package, which, if passed by Congress, would increase the federal share of Medicaid spending this coming year.

The state says designing Healthy Montana Kids is a “work in progress,” and that it will certainly ask for public input, but that it’s too early in the process yet. Health officials also plan to appear before a legislative panel next week to update key lawmakers and the public on the plans.

“We’re always open to new ideas,” the agency said in a statement Friday. “This is an exciting time in our department to be involved in implementing a program that’s going to help thousands of kids.”